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# Highway Art Provides **Community Canvas**

**C**altrans' Transportation Art Program offers communities a chance to beautify their infrastructure in a way that embraces local sensibilities and reflects regional culture. Since 1977, more than 400 murals, installations and fixtures have been added to the state highway system through the program.

The California Transportation Foundation recently affirmed the program's ability to improve quality of life when it bestowed its Sustainable Transportation/Environmental Enhancement Award on a set of Bay Area additions administered by Caltrans' District 4.

Among those award-winning projects are installations in a pair of San Jose underpasses that stitch together two downtown areas — providing a pleasant pedestrian and bike link between residential neighborhoods and the business district.

The Foundation also honored a life-affirming series of murals painted by local schoolchildren in Oakland, and the popular installation that offers San Francisco residents a light show along the cables of the western span of the Bay Bridge.



Through the years, Caltrans has recognized that art integrated into transportation structures can enhance and reflect the aesthetic, environmental, scenic and cultural values of the affected community. Local artists bring this vision to life. Such art may include graphic or sculptural artwork, either freestanding or placed on required engineering features (such as sound walls, retaining walls, bridges, bridge abutments, bridge rails, or slope paving) that expresses something special about a community's history, resources or character.

The tech components of the San Jose installations, for example, underscore its identity as the unofficial capital of Silicon Valley.

"Sensing You" illuminates Santa Clara Street beneath Interstate 87 which had been considered a somewhat intimidating stretch for pedestrians and bicyclists. It is part of a larger public art effort called Illuminating Downtown Project funded by a \$600,000 grant from ArtPlace America.

The "Sensing You" interactive artwork is made up of LED lighting elements, a cell phone interface and painted rings that some have likened to doughnuts

— a comparison disliked by the artist. The patterns are activated by sensors that detect pedestrians and bicyclists moving through the space, setting off pre-programmed sequences.

A partnership with Google's Niantic Lab allows players of the online game "Ingress" to "temporarily take control of the space and making manifest in the artwork aspects of the game from their cell phones," according to "Sensing You" artist Dan Corson's website. "Inspired by raindrops on water and the echoing patterns emitting from our cell phones, this artwork seeks to link technology and nature in this urban landscape sitting over the Guadalupe River — at the heart of Silicon Valley."

Caltrans worked with the city to ensure the installation met the criteria of the Transportation Art Program, including that it not distract motorists and that it not use lights like red, yellow or green that are associated with traffic control. The lighting animations are designed to be slow enough so the average driver will not see any movement, but for the pedestrian, the movement will be highly discernable. The patterning was originally inspired by the pattern of



**At left**, the "Superheroes" art project in West Oakland involves murals on three underpasses below Interstate 580 designed and conceptualized by local middle and high school students. **Top right**, "Sensing You" illuminates Santa Clara Street beneath State Route 87 in San Jose. **Bottom right**, Figueroa Street beneath U.S. Highway 101 in Los Angeles.





Nearly two-dozen artists helped paint this mural on the Buena Vista underpass on State Route 94 in Lemon Grove, in San Diego County.



The storylines for the "Superheroes" art in West Oakland were created by students at McClymonds High School.



"The Waterhole," on State Route 178 in Ridgecrest, was created this year by artist Olaf Doud.



raindrops falling on still water as well as being inspired by the crowds of people moving through the underpass — every person with a cell phone emitting echoes of radio waves.


“Sensing Water” uses paint and projected lighting resembling flowing water and the Aurora Borealis. This piece is influenced by real-time changes in weather and wind that effect the Guadalupe River, which flows under SR-87 at this junction. Real-time data affect the ceiling patterning at night. The inspiration for this piece began with the ever-present awareness of water issues in California. The project links both the awareness of water concerns to the new focus of the high-tech industry through the use of dynamic illumination.

In Oakland, community-based Attitudinal Healing Connection sponsored three murals in West Oakland under Interstate 580 on San Pablo Avenue, Market Street and West Street. The murals were designed and conceptualized by local middle and high school students. The project gave community youth the opportunity to be engaged in a public forum and allowed their voices to be heard.

The designers based their artwork on input from

residents asked to describe their hopes and dreams for the community. The superheroes and storylines were created by McClymonds High School students. “Superheroes #3,” a portion of which is featured on the Mile Marker cover, is the work of artists David Burke and Javier Rocabado with help from students from West Oakland Middle School.

District 4 worked with the city of San Francisco and Illuminate the Arts to bring the wildly popular “Bay Lights” back to the western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge as a permanent installation. The sculpture brings together technology with light and art to communicate images on a grand scale. The kinetic nature of the changing patterns in light draws crowds together to view the images that the artist has derived from the bay setting. Sensors that detect changes in the environment influence the patterns to change to reflect the dynamic bay landscape.

For specific information on the Transportation Art Program, refer to [Chapter 29](#) of the Project Development Procedures Manual. 

*Source: District 4 Office of Landscape Architecture*



**Top left**, the underside of U.S. Highway 50 near downtown Sacramento is decorated by “Bright Underbelly,” completed in 2016 by artists Hennessy Christophel and Sofia Lacin. **At right**, the western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge is lit up by “Bay Lights.” **Bottom left**, the “Antlers Bridge Fish Scene,” by artist Jerry Stuart, decorates the Antlers Bridge on Interstate 5 in Shasta County.